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ABSTRACT

A study examined student perceptions of the school environment in a small, rural high school in southeastern North Carolina. Surveys returned by 417 students in grades 9-12 suggested that the presence of gangs and unsafe or hidden areas were not major problems. The fact that 46 percent indicated that vandalism was a problem suggests that vandalism deserves some special attention. Major problem areas with respect to safety included the presence of weapons, prevalence of stealing, potential for inter-student conflict, and use of non-peaceful means to resolve conflict. A substantial number of respondents agreed that "students dread coming to this school." However, the extent to which this view was related to the other responses was hard to tell. Students in grade 9 were more likely than their peers in grades 10-12 to agree that there were hidden areas in the school where students hung out. Students in grades 10 and 11 were more likely than other students to agree that a lot of things got stolen in the school, and that fighting was a way some problems got solved. Those in grade 10 were more likely to agree that students dreaded coming to school. Females were more likely than males to disagree that students knew how to solve conflict nonviolently, and more likely to agree that a lot of things got stolen at the school and that students dreaded coming to school. Six tables present survey results. (TD)

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The Making of an Inviting High School in Rural North Carolina

Research on Safe Schools

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The Making of an Inviting High School in Rural North Carolina

INTRODUCTION

NBC news reported in 1997 ("What's Wrong," 1997) that school safety caused great concern between parents and teachers. The safety issue appeared more prominent than poor student achievement. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 1991) reports those arrests among children less than 18 years of age have increased 60% over the past 10 years. A significant increase in crime involving children 10 to 14 years of age has occurred from 1988 to 1992. The number of arrests increased from 194 to 301 (Lacayo, 1994). Additional research indicates that many crimes committed by adolescents are not processed in the court systems (Kingery, Coggeshall, and Alford, 1998). Only recently have schools begun to create comprehensive violence prevention programs (Corvo, 1997). In general various reports have underscored the need to study the issue of school violence and safety within local context and the factors that may mediate students' perceptions of school safety.

It is believed that systematic studies are critical to obtaining information essential to a clear understanding of the nature or scope of safety related problems and the development of responsive programs. In this regards, students' perspectives are deemed invaluable.

METHODOLOGY

This report documents the outcomes of the survey conducted to ascertain how the students in a small, rural high school in sout'ieastern North Carolina view various components of the school environment. Selected teachers administered surveys to the

students in the spring of 1999. Four hundred and seventeen (417) students returned their complete, useable surveys.

The research was conducted with the 574 students in grades 9 – 12 at South Robeson High School, Rowland, NC, in the spring of 1999. The student composition was 46% African-American, 48% Native American, 4% Caucasian, and 2% other. South Robeson High School is a small, rural high school located in Southeastern North Carolina. Subjects completed the Inviting School Safety Survey (ISSS) (Lehr and Purkey, 1997) in their homeroom settings. Teachers gave the survey to students, read the instructions aloud, answered questions for students and collected the completed surveys at the end of 50 minutes. The distribution of the respondents by race/ethnicity, sex, and grade level is presented in Table IT-1.

Survey Instrument

The Inviting School Safety Survey (ISSS) (Lehr and Purkey, 1997) was utilized to collect data for this study. The ISSS contains 50 items, in the form of descriptive statements, designed to obtain respondents' perceptions relative to five (5) components of their school environment: people, places, programs, processes, and policies. According to Shoffner and Vacc (1999), "all items are behaviorally anchored, having been identified through observations in schools, and surveys completed by teachers, counselors, administrators, and students" (p.68). . Respondents report their level of agreement or disagreement with each of the statements using 5-point Likert-type scale with the following response categories: (a) Strongly agree, (b) Agree, (c) Undecided, (d) Disagree, and (e) Strongly disagree.

Data Analysis

The surveys collected from students were screened for completeness, and surveys that had no response to all ISSS items or had "undecided" checked for all items were eliminated (Note: The ISSS constituted Part II of an instrument that was administered to the students). Two major considerations governed the analysis of the data collected in this study. One was the intent to address the fundamental question regarding students' perceptions of their school environment, as measured by their reactions to the statements contained in the ISSS. In this regard, "neutral" responses such as "undecided" provide little or no illuminating information. For this reason, the analysis of data was restricted to cases that had "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" as a response. That is, cases with "undecided" as a response were excluded from the analysis of the data for individual survey items.

The second consideration relates to the goal of presenting the most parsimonious, interpretable, and valid data. That is, (a) distinguish in a concise manner the rate of agreement and disagreement with respective survey statements, (b) present a clear picture of the relationship, if any, between students' classification variables (grade level, sex) and position on survey statements, using as few response categories as possible, and (c) minimize the probability of empty cells and unacceptable level of expected frequencies in the comparison of the responses of student subgroups that would render results concerning observed relationships invalid. To accomplish this, two major categories of responses were formed: the response categories, "strongly agree" and "agree" were combined into "**agree**," and "strongly disagree" were combined into "**disagree**."

The data for this study were analyzed using the following statistical procedures: Descriptive statistical analysis was performed to determine the rates (N & %) at which participants selected "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree" as their response to each survey statement, and the rates of the reformulated (combined) response categories, **"agree"** and **"disagree."** Chi-square test of goodness of fit was utilized to determine whether there was a significant difference between the overall rates of agreement and disagreement with each survey statement, using the data derived from the reformulated response categories, **"agree"** and **"disagree."** The alpha level .05 was used as the criteria for accepting the difference between rates as significant. Chi-square test of independence was applied to determine whether the reformulated response categories, **"agree"** and **"disagree,"** were distributed significantly differently for males and females, and for students in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. Any difference that attained the alpha level of .10 was interpreted as significant.

Table IT-1

Distribution of Survey Participants by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, and Grade Level

Variable	N	%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	171	41.0
Indian/Native American	207	49.6
White/Caucasian	12	2.9
Other*	12	2.9
No Response	15	3.6
Sex/Gender		
Male	176	42.2
Female	213	51.1
No Response	28	6.7
Grade		
9th	174	41.7
10th	94	22.5
11th	78	18.7
12th	71	17.0

*Respondents indicated multiple race/ethnic categories.

RESULTS

Eleven (11) statements presented in the ISSS addressed perceived relative safety of the school, feelings of fear, inter-student relationship and potential for conflict, conflict resolution, and practice of non-violent means of negotiation. The distribution of the actual responses students indicated to represent their opinion on each of the statements is provided in Table SS-1. Each survey statement is restated, below, followed by a discussion of the rates at which students agreed or disagreed with respective statements and the extent to which respondents' opinion was found to be significantly associated (related) to grade level and sex.

Survey Statement #22: Gangs are a problem in this school.

Two hundred and one (201) out of 270 respondents disagreed with the statement that "gangs are a problem in this school." The rate at which respondents disagreed (74.4%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents agreed (25.6%) with the statement [x^2 (1, N = 270) = 64.53, p <.001]. Respondents' opinion was not found to be significantly related grade level (3, N = 270) = 4.40, p >.20] and sex [x^2 (1, N = 257) = 0.24, p >.60].

Survey Statement #45: Students sometimes bring weapons to school.

One hundred and seventy-two (172) out of 270 respondents agreed with the statement "students sometimes bring weapons to school". The rate at which respondents agreed (63.7%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents disagreed (36.3%) with it. Respondents' opinion was not found to be significantly related grade level [x^2 (3, N = 270) = 3.64, p >.30] and sex (1, N = 256) = 0.09, p >.75].

Survey Statement #2: There are hidden areas in this school where students hang out.

One hundred and sixty-five (165) out of 279 respondents disagreed with the statement that "there are hidden areas in this school where students hang out." The rate at which respondents disagreed (59.1%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents disagreed (40.9%) with the statement [x^2 (1, N = 279) = 9.32, p <.002].

Respondents' opinion was found to be significantly related grade level [x^2 (3, N = 279) = 10.24, p =.0166]. As shown in Table SS-2, the students in Grade 9 were more likely to agree than disagree with the survey statement while those in grade 10, grade 11, and grade 12 were more likely to disagree with the statement. Respondents' opinion was not found to be significantly related to sex [x^2 (1, N = 262) = 0.27, p >.60].

Survey Statement #21: There are places in this school where students do not feel safe.

One hundred and forty-seven (147) out of 262 respondents disagreed with the statement that "there are places in this school where students do not feel safe." The rate at which respondents disagreed (56.1%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents agreed (43.9%) with the statement [x^2 (1, N = 262) = 3.91, p =.048]. Respondents' opinion was not found to be significantly related grade level [x^2 (3, N = 262) = 4.99, p >.15] and sex [x^2 (1, N = 249) = 0.53, p >.45].

Survey Statement #14: Students in this school are afraid to go to the restroom.

One hundred and ninety-two (192) out of 275 respondents disagreed with the statement that "students in this school are afraid to go to the restroom." The rate at which

respondents disagreed (69.8%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents agreed (30.2%) with the statement [x^2 (1, N = 275) = 43.20, p <.001]. Respondents' opinion was not found to be significantly related grade level [x^2 (N = 275) = 0.12, p >.95] and sex [x^2 (1, N = 261) = 0.12, p >.70].

Survey Statement #23: Vandalism is a problem in this school.

One hundred and forty-one (141) out of 264 respondents disagreed with the statement that "vandalism is a problem in this school" and 123 agreed with the statement. The difference between the rates at which respondents disagreed (53.4%) and agreed (46.6%) with the survey statement was not statistically significant [x^2 (1, N = 264) = 1.23, p >.25]. Respondents' opinion was not found to be significantly related grade level [x^2 (3, N = 264) = 1.34, p >.70] and sex [x^2 (1, N = 250) = 2.68, p >.10].

Survey Statement #33: A lot of things get stolen in this school.

One hundred and seventy-seven (177) out of 264 respondents agreed with the statement "a lot of things get stolen in this school." The rate at which respondents agreed (67%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents disagreed (33%) with it [x^2 (1, N = 264) = 30.68, p <.001].

Respondents' opinion was found to be significantly related grade level and sex (see Table SS-3). The students in grade 10 and grade 11 were more likely than their counterparts in grade 9, grade 12 to agree with the survey statement [x^2 (3, N = 264) = 8.69, p =.0337]. Regarding the relationship between respondents' opinion and sex, the females were more likely than the males to agree with the survey statement [x^2 (1, N = 250) = 3.20, p =.0737].

Survey Statement #34: Students get along well in this school.

One hundred and forty-one (141) out of 264 respondents disagreed with the statement that "students get along well in this school." The rate at which respondents disagreed (56.4%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents agreed (43.6%) with the statement [x^2 (1, N = 243) = 3.96, p =.047]. Respondents' opinion was not found to be significantly related grade level [x^2 (3, N = 243) = 1.80, p >.60] or sex [x^2 (1, N = 229) = 0.02, p >.85].

Survey Statement #12: Students know how to solve conflicts nonviolently.

One hundred and ninety-seven (197) out of 277 respondents disagreed with the statement that "students know how to solve conflicts nonviolently." The rate at which respondents disagreed (71.1%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents agreed (28.9%) with it [x^2 (1, N = 277) = 49.42, p <.001].

Respondents' opinion was found to be significantly related to sex [x^2 (1, N = 264) = 3.99, p =.0458]. As shown in Table SS-4, the females were more likely than the males to disagree with the survey statement. No significant relationship was found between respondents' opinion and grade level [x^2 (3, N = 277) = 5.11, p >.15].

Survey Statement #46: Fighting is a way some problems are solved in this school.

One hundred and seventy-six (176) out of 282 respondents agreed with the statement that "fighting is a way some problems are solved in this school." The rate at which respondents agreed (62.4%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents disagreed (37.6%) with it [x^2 (1, N = 282) = 17.38, p <.001].

Respondents' opinion was found to be significantly to related grade level [x^2 (3, $\underline{N}$ = 282) = 16.35, $\underline{p}$ =.001]. As shown in Table SS-5, the students in grade 10 and grade 11 were more likely than the counterparts in grade 9 and grade 12 to agree with the survey statement. No significant relationship was found between respondents' opinion and sex [x^2 (1, $\underline{N}$ = 267) = 1.12, $\underline{p}$ >.25].

Survey Statement #11: Students dread coming to this school.

One hundred and seventy-five (175) out of 254 respondents agreed with the survey statement that "students dread coming to this school." The rate at which respondents agreed (66.3%) with the survey statement was significantly higher than the rate at which respondents disagreed (33.7%) with the statement [x^2 (1, $\underline{N}$ = 264) = 28.02, $\underline{p}$ <.001].

Respondents' opinion was found to be significantly related to grade level and sex (see Table SS-6). The students in grade 10 were more likely than the counterparts in grade 9, grade 11, and grade 12 to agree with the survey statement [x^2 (3, $\underline{N}$ = 264) = 10.35, $\underline{p}$ =.0158]. Regarding the relationship between respondents' opinion and sex, the females were more likely than the males to agree with the survey statement [x^2 (1, $\underline{N}$ = 249) = 3.74, $\underline{p}$ =.0531].

Table SS-1

Frequencies of Actual Responses: Survey Statements About School Safety.

Survey Statement		Response			
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Gangs are a problem in this school.	N	29	40	105	96
	%	**10.7**	**14.8**	**38.9**	**35.6**
Students sometimes bring weapons to school.	N	62	110	57	41
	%	**23.0**	**40.7**	**21.1**	**15.2**
There are hidden areas in the school where students hang out.	N	52	62	66	99
	%	**18.6**	**22.2**	**23.7**	**35.5**
There are places in this school where students do not feel safe.	N	47	68	72	75
	%	**17.9**	**26.0**	**27.5**	**28.6**
Students in this school are afraid to go to the restroom.	N	45	38	86	106
	%	**16.4**	**13.8**	**31.3**	**38.5**
Vandalism is a problem in this school.	N	48	75	89	52
	%	**18.2**	**28.4**	**33.7**	**19.7**
A lot of things get stolen in this school.	N	80	97	55	32
	%	**30.3**	**36.7**	**20.8**	**12.1**
Students get along well in this school.	N	35	71	78	59
	%	**14.4**	**29.2**	**32.1**	**24.3**
Students know how to solve conflicts non-violently.	N	19	61	103	94
	%	**6.9**	**22.0**	**37.2**	**33.9**
Fighting is a way some problems are solved in this school.	N	81	95	56	50
	%	**28.7**	**33.7**	**19.9**	**17.7**
Students dread coming to this school.	N	93	82	53	36
	%	**35.2**	**31.1**	**20.1**	**13.6**

Table SS-2

Results of Chi-square Analysis of the Relationship Between Students' Grade Level and Response to the Statement, There are Hidden Areas in the School Where Students Hang Out.

Group	Response		x^2	df	p
	Agree	Disagree			
9th Grade	59(46.6)	55(67.4)			
10th Grade	21(26.2)	43(37.8)			
			10.24	3	.0166
11th Grade	20(21.7)	33(31.3)			
12th Grade	14(19.6)	34(28.4)			

Note: Expected values are enclosed in parentheses.

Table SS-3

Results of Chi-square Analysis of the Relationship Between Students' Grade Level and Response to the Statement, A Lot of Things Get Stolen in this School.

Group	Response		x^2	df	p
	Agree	Disagree			
Grade Level					
9th Grade	69(71.1)	37(34.9)			
10th Grade	43(40.9)	18(20.1)			
			8.69	3	.0337
11th Grade	46(39.6)	13(19.4)			
12th Grade	19(25.5)	19(12.5)			
Sex					
Male	66(72.6)	42(35.4)			
			3.20	1	.0737
Female	102(95.4)	40(46.6)			

Note: Expected values are enclosed in parentheses.

Table SS-4

Results of Chi-square Analysis of the Relationship Between Students' Gender and Response to the Statement, Students Know How to Solve Conflicts Nonviolently.

Group	Response		x^2	df	p
	Agree	Disagree			
Male	37(29.9)	71(78.1)	3.99	1	.0458
Female	36(43.1)	120(112.9)			

Note: Expected values are enclosed in parentheses.

Table SS-5

Results of Chi-square Analysis of the Relationship Between Students' Grade Level and Response to the Statement, Fighting is a Way Some Problems are Solved in this School.

Group	Response		x^2	df	p
	Agree	Disagree			
9th Grade	66(73.6)	52(44.4)	16.35	3	.0010
10th Grade	53(44.9)	19(27.1)			
11th Grade	42(35.0)	14(21.0)			
12th Grade	15(22.5)	21(13.5)			

Note: Expected values are enclosed in parentheses.

Table SS-6

Results of Chi-square Analysis of the Relationship Between Students' Grade Level and Response to the Statement, Students Dread Coming to this School.

Group	Response		x^2	df	p
	Agree	Disagree			
Grade Level					
9th Grade	66(70.3)	40(35.7)			
10th Grade	52(42.4)	12(21.6)			
			10.35	3	.0158
11th Grade	37(37.1)	19(18.9)			
12th Grade	20(25.2)	18(12.8)			
Sex					
Male	64(71.1)	42(34.9)			
			3.74	1	.0531
Female	103(95.9)	40(47.1)			

Note: Expected values are enclosed in parentheses.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study, in general, suggest that the presence of "gangs" and the existence of unsafe places or hidden areas may not be major problems in the school attended by the respondents. A significant majority of the respondents (56% - 74.4%) disagreed with the survey statements that (a) "gangs are a problem in this school", (b) "there are hidden areas in this school where students hang out", (c) "these are places in this school where students do not feel safe", (d) " students in this school are afraid to go to the restroom".

Although vandalism was not cited by the majority as a major problem in the school, the number of respondents who indicated it was a problem was relatively substantial (46.6%). It would seem that the problem of vandalism deserves some special attention.

Feedback from respondents suggests that major problem areas, with regards to safety, include the presence of weapons, prevalence of stealing, the potential for inter-student conflict, and the use of non-peaceful means to resolve conflict. A significant majority (62% – 67%) agreed with the statements that (a) "students sometimes bring weapons to the school", (b) "a lot of things get stolen in this school", (c) "fighting is a way some problems are solved in this school", and (d) "vandalism is a problem in this school"; the majority (56% - 71.1%) disagreed with the statements that (a) "students get along well in this school", and (b) "students know how to solve conflicts nonviolently".

In this study, a substantial and significant number of respondents (66.3%) were found to agree with the statement that "students dread coming to this school". The extent to which this view is related to the responses obtained on the other safety items is hard to tell. If it is, based on the results of this study, one may hazard the presence of weapons, weak student interpersonal relations and potential for conflict, and the use of non-peaceful means in resolving conflict as possible explanations. The validity of such a claim, however, would require additional study or analysis.

This study revealed subtle and not-too-subtle gender and grade-level differentials in the opinions of students regarding the perceived relative safety of their school, feelings of fear and the use of nonviolent means in resolving conflicts: Regarding grade level differences, (a) the students in grade 9 were more likely than their peers in grades 10, 11, and 12 to agree with the statement that "there are hidden areas in this school where students hang out"; (b) the students in grade 10 and 11 were more likely than other students to agree with the statements that "a lot of things get stolen in this school" and "fighting is a way some problems are solved in this school"; and (c) those in grade 10 were more likely to agree with the statement that "students dread coming to this school".

With respect to gender based differences, the females were more likely than the males to disagree with the statement that " students know how to solve conflict nonviolently", and more likely than the males to agree with the statement that "a lot of things get stolen in this school", and the statement that " students dread coming to this school". Taken together, these results underscore the need to undertake in-depth analyses of subgroup data in order to fully understand the issue(s) being studied. The extent to which the knowledge derived from studies of school safety issues and the degree to which planned responses are successful may well hinge on this.

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